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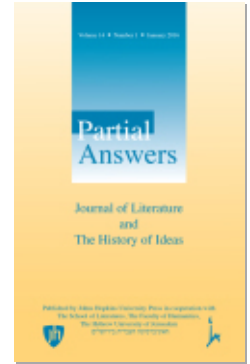
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The Inorganic Aesthetic in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

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Featuring characters and subplots almost too numerous to follow, Dickens's novels attest to the genre's penchant for variety. At the same time, they famously rely on repetition, both at the sentence level and thematically. Recurrent motifs abound: imprisonment in *Little Dorrit*, guilt and confession in *Great Expectations*, and chaos and decay in *Bleak House*. Repetition in *Our Mutual Friend* is potent enough to render the novel uncanny, with doubles becoming indistinct from one another at various points, and the plot unfolding through versions of events such as drowning; the novel overflows with fixed memes, which are reiterated, almost mechanically, in various situations. Someone must always risk drowning in the river, be it Gaffer Hexam, Eugene Wrayburn, John Harmon, Rogue Riderhood, or Bradley Headstone. Some young woman is bound to be the "boofer lady," be it Lizzie or Bella (324). As the plot retraces its own steps, we confront a world in which individuals appear interchangeable, and the power of individuation is temporarily suspended.

I propose that this formal structure moves the novel away from the well-trodden terrain of organic form, one of the most commonplace literary ideals of the period, which the Victorians inherited from the British Romantics. Organic form consists of the interdependence of parts that are unified but distinct; it offers, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's words, "unity in the many" (1995c: 510). Coleridge's writing on organicism persistently focuses on plurality, which he singles out as the driving principle behind life and the guarantor of individuation. The characteristic heterogeneity of the novel may comport with organic form, but it does not have to, as themes, figures, or subplots may not form a unified whole. Of course, literary criticism in and beyond the second half of the 20th century has focused precisely on the ways in which texts do not cohere, reading them as symptoms of ideological impasses or linking them to the uncontrollability of linguistic signification. Like internal rifts, repetition can potentially undermine the organic ideal of unity.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, recurrences in the plot pave the way for an inorganic aesthetic. As one character replaces another in the drowning

mime, each fills an office formerly occupied by another. In addition to repetition, representations of dead or dying bodies and the trope of the dust heaps affirm the inorganic aesthetic in *Our Mutual Friend*. The novel conceives of an alternative to organic form: like a shell, inorganic form comes to offer a mold into which any content can fit. When bodies, on the verge of expiration, turn into husks or shells, they come to exemplify the structure that characterizes such inorganic form. These lifeless figures have no content, no subjectivity or soul to flesh them out. The dust particle, the quintessential embodiment of inorganic form in the novel, similarly divorces form from content. Whereas organicism promises a structure that is shaped by its own essence, the inorganic alternative conceives of itinerant forms that are attached to none.

Dickens's taste for repetition is famous, but critics have attended more to its linguistic and cognitive implications than its implicit dialogue with Romantic and Victorian writing on aesthetics. Noting Dickens's tendency to redeploy figures, Garrett Stewart has identified "metaphoric overkill" as one of the key characteristics of his prose (2001: 157). Recently, historicist approaches to repetition have associated it with "the social and psychological effects of habit" in the Victorian period and even with the "information theory" of our own era (Vrettos 16; Reed 16). Discussing repetition under the rubric of "redundancy," John Reed argues that it "indicates the limitations of the realist programme":

Patterns of imagery, recurrent motifs, and repetitions of themes are common in many types of fiction, but Dickens subsumes all of these and the narrative design of the novel itself to a mode of transmission that makes each of these devices reinforce the others, thereby more severely circumscribing the meaning of the information as it becomes denser. . . . Redundancy can be seen as such a governing force imbedded in the novel's language itself. . . . In some ways, it is a mode of meaning that is the opposite of Bakhtin's heteroglossia. (18)

While I agree with Reed that Dickensian redundancy operates in tangent to the plurality of discourse in the novel, I maintain that through it Dickens does not so much circumscribe meaning as envision an aesthetics in which form floats free of content. It is not only descriptions of the dust heaps or silhouettes but also the structure of the novel that undermines organic form: through the repetition of tropes and plot elements, the novel detaches form from content. The inorganic form it presents is abstract in the sense that any content can be poured into it. Form comes to lack an essence; as such, it has the potential to unsettle the bourgeois comfort with stability and individuation.

Lifeless Form in *Our Mutual Friend*

In *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew noted that “in some parts of the suburbs on windy days London is a perfect dust-mill” (II: 210). The exact composition of the dust that amassed on London streets was a matter of debate in the Victorian period, with as prominent a scientist as John Tyndall (340) maintaining that a significant proportion of the dust particles in the London air were organic. Kate Flint notes the heterogeneous composition of dust, which was, by one measure, 55 percent inorganic:

The inorganic dust particles came from the pulverized dried mud of the streets, the wearing down of granite pavements and roads by feet and by iron-shod horses, and from what Wallace called “our enormous combustion of fuel pouring into the air volumes of smoke charged with unconsumed particles of carbon.” (43)

The organic component of dust was similarly diverse in origin, containing “particles of every description of decaying animal and vegetable matter” (Carter 398, quoted in Flint 44).

Notwithstanding the organic origin of about half of the dust particles on urban streets, the physical structure of the dust heaps in *Our Mutual Friend* epitomizes the inorganic form that the novel both represents and embodies. Made up of identical particles, the dust heap constitutes an undifferentiated whole in which parts are indistinct from one another. Dust indicates the loss of particularity:

[Harmon] grew rich as a Dust Contractor, and lived in a hollow hilly country entirely composed of Dust. On his own small estate the growling old vagabond threw up his mountain range, like an old volcano, and its geological formation was Dust. Coal-dust, vegetable-dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust — all manner of Dust. (24)

Coal, vegetable, and crockery, dissolving into dust, constitute an amorphous mass with no bounds, a vast sea of sameness. The whole consists of the part replicated over and over. In this description, dust particles have no essence, and, as such, have become interchangeable. The dust heaps constitute a structure that can accommodate any content.

The inorganic alternative treats form as an itinerant shell. For Coleridge, “the form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily out of the properties of the material, as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened” (1995a: 495). Coleridge’s mechanical form

has the appeal of flexibility: outside the organic word, it seems, matter can assume any shape, and a specific form can consist of any matter. Such divorcing of form from content is indeed what we encounter in Dickens's dust heaps, with coal, vegetable, and bone all dissolving into dust. Each substance, regardless of its essence, is equally capable of assuming particle form.

If the dust heaps in *Our Mutual Friend* turn inorganic form into a self-conscious element of style, so do the novel's meditations on silhouettes, husks, and shells. The trope of drowning, almost mechanical in its tendency to repeat itself, often conjures up forms that are free of content — aptly so, as repetition is defined by a procession of contents that come and go. First, Gaffer finds a dead body in the river, but later others are fishing him out of the water: “They ran to the rope, leaving [Riderhood] gasping there. Soon, the *form* of the bird of prey, dead some hours, lay stretched upon the shore” (175, *italics mine*). Gaffer's death reverses the opening scene of the novel, re-casting the subject who formerly does the finding as the object being found. Gaffer's body replaces the body of the man whom he once located in the river. Precisely at that moment of substitution, the body appears as a mere shell, as if the soul corresponds to some living content in whose absence form, no longer organic, achieves autonomy.

In another iteration of the scene of drowning by the river, Riderhood's nearly dead body is pulled out of the river, just like Gaffer's and Radfoot's corpses. When the man is suspended between life and death, his form is what Coleridge would call mechanical: “it is Riderhood and no other, or it is the outer husk and shell of Riderhood and no other, that is borne into Miss Abbey's first floor bedroom” (438). Reduced to a mere shell, form is at once all there is, but also not fully present (the “flabby lump of mortality” lacks a dignified shape [439]). In another iteration of the same trope, Eugene's body, also nearly dead, appears as the husk of what once was:

[Lizzie] saw the drowning *figure* rise to the surface, slightly struggle, and as if by instinct turn over on its back to float. Just so had she first dimly seen the face which she now dimly saw again. . . . Once, she let the body evade her, not being sure of her grasp. Twice, and she had seized it by its bloody hair. (683, *italics mine*)

The recurrence here is double. Another body has emerged half-dead out of the water — Lizzie has seen helpless bodies floating in the river before. The initial reduction of Eugene to a “figure” foregrounds the cycli-

cal nature of the plot, while the subsequent moment of recognition, in which “the shores r[ing] to the terrible cry she utter[s],” moves the plot forward. In the final iteration of the trope, Bradley drowns Riderhood, and himself along with him, with the help of an object whose immutable form contrasts to the fragility of life. The rivets of the iron ring “h[old] tight,” “girdl[ing]” Riderhood, the dead bodies of both men surrounded by the dying, “lying under the ooze and scum behind one of the rotting gates” (781).

Requiring the substitution of one body for another, the mistaken identity plot cements what repetition implies: bodies are interchangeable and events mirror one another. John Harmon, narrating for the first time how he came to be presumed dead, reveals that he and Radfoot, the man who tried to destroy him, went through the same experience. Harmon explains, “I perceived that Radfoot had been murdered by some unknown hands for the money which would have murdered me, and that probably we had both been shot into the river from the same dark place into the same dark tide, when the stream ran deep and strong” (366). Harmon’s experience replicates that of his enemy, whose dead body is mistaken for him.

With its suspended animation and lifeless bodies, *Our Mutual Friend* casts the living aside in the memorable chapter on Mr. Venus’s taxidermy shop, a shrine to the failure of organic form. Once organic, objects in the shop are detached from the wholes to which they belonged. Individual bones randomly float around, waiting forever for articulation, but the whole is now lost and beyond reach. The dissolution of organic form is indeed a crisis for individuation. Nothing less than the unity of the human subject is at stake when Mr. Wegg, stepping into the shop, at the precise moment we expect him to inform the host of how he has been doing, instead says, “And how have I been going on, this long time, Mr. Venus?” (84). The part has just become equivalent to the whole, with the bone of the amputated leg standing in for the subject who lost it. As in the novel, so in Mr. Venus’s shop: the organic model of complementary parts making up a whole has been cancelled, and the whole is nothing more than the part amplified and replicated.

What Steven Connor has called “metaphoricized metonymy” further challenges organic differentiation in *Our Mutual Friend*. Connor applies this notion to the portrayal of Bounderby in *Hard Times*: “Dickens’s description here turns metonymy, the separate, contiguous details of Bounderby’s house and front door, into metaphor, since every detail is merely a repetition of the designation ‘Bounderby’” (116). Parts do

not simply represent the whole through association or contiguity — they actually resemble the whole. This dynamic governs the description of Wegg's body, in which the character of the whole is defined by a single part — the wooden leg. The wooden prosthetic leg is dead matter, and the overall form to which it belongs also resembles it. The narrator notes, "Wegg was a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material . . . he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally" (53). The quintessential example of organic form — the human being, with highly differentiated organs and their complementary functions — is overwritten by dead matter.

Noting the novel's preoccupation with life and its expiration, literary critics have linked those themes to various discourses from the economic to the evolutionary, but not to aesthetic principles. For Catherine Gallagher, "vital morbidity" in the novel betrays the "bodily origins of the commodity" and its tendency to transcend that origin to acquire abstract value (96). For Howard D. Fulweiler, "the pattern of mutual relations" in the novel finds its full meaning in what was then "the newly emerging conceptual frame of evolutionary biology." Interrelations between characters, which often remain hidden, reflect a Darwinian "vision of the mutual relationship of organic beings to each other and to their environment" (55, 50).¹ If the novel's organicism is embedded in the interrelations of characters, its preoccupation with mechanical form is best represented by the dust heaps, as well as by repetition. Yet through representations of the living, the dead, and everything in between, the novel actually engages a discourse on aesthetics going all the way back to Aristotle, mediated through Schlegel and Coleridge, and continued by Dickens's contemporaries including George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Organic Form, Coleridge, and the Victorians

The idea of organic unity, which precedes that of organic form, dates back to antiquity. When Aristotle claimed that tragedy should "resemble a living organism," he meant specifically that the plot "should have for its subject a single action" (47). Part-whole relations have remained a central concern for modern philosophers of aesthetics, and the harmony

¹ In a similar vein, Sally Ledger finds that even characters' deaths in the novel relate to natural history.

of parts remained significant in aesthetic judgment in the Enlightenment.² What Coleridge, following Schlegel,³ subtly added to existing ideas of unity or harmony was an understanding that each of the complementary parts in a work of literature bore the signature of the whole. Coleridge's famous treatment of Shakespeare as genius postulated that form was "innate" in the sense that it "shape[d] as it develop[ed] itself from within" (1995a: 495). In this view, the whole embodies a spirit that infuses each of its distinct parts.

Drawing attention to the interrelation of parts, 19th-century organicist rhetoric amplified the central role that multiplicity played in Enlightenment aesthetics. In the 18th century, Hutcheson had singled out the interplay of unity and variety as the defining feature of the beautiful: "There are many conceptions of objects which are agreeable upon other accounts, such as grandeur, novelty, sanctity, and some others. But what we call beautiful in objects . . . seems to be in compound ratio of uniformity and variety" (40). For his part, Mendelssohn reaffirmed that "all concepts of beauty" should allow us to perceive "a multiplicity without tedious reflecting" (14). Life was bound to provide a fertile metaphor for extending an aesthetic tradition that valued harmony, not just because of the diversity of species, but also because of the potential for variation within a single species: "In Man," wrote Coleridge, "the individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself concentered" (1995c: 551). Coleridge highlighted that, in the organic world, unity precludes uniformity:

we speak and think of Life as a simple unity, whether we consider it as a Power or as a Result; and yet the term Constitution, whether we take it to mean the whole complex organism, as that which is constituted, or as the powers of constituting, manifestly supposes a Plurality. (1995b: 1027)

Here the object of inquiry is not *composition*, that commonplace literary and artistic term which had been in operation since the seventeenth century (*OED* 8), but its biological counterpart, *constitution*. Both words indicate a process through which parts combine to make a whole, but it

²Francis Hutcheson states, "The figures which excite in us the ideas of beauty seem to be those in which there is uniformity amidst variety" (40); similarly, Moses Mendelssohn maintains that our perception of beauty arises out of "our fondness for the unity in a multiplicity" (21).

³Comparing Schlegel's *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* to Coleridge's *Lectures*, G. N. G. Orsini writes that Coleridge was not only "following in the footsteps" of Schlegel, but also "using Schlegel's own words," but in lectures he prepared for teaching, not in material he intended for publication (101).

is in the latter that plurality evokes the mysterious powers that initiate or sustain life.

In addition to looming large as an aesthetic ideal, organic form was the dominant episteme around which economics and linguistics — as well as biology — were organized. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault shows that, after the end of the 18th century, organicism was at the root of a new “experience of order,” which altered the understanding of what constituted a totality (xxiii). Wholes were now comprised of complementary — but distinct — parts whose internal relations remained invisible and developed across time. For example, the biologist George Cuvier maintained that all the organs of an animal form a system in which the parts interact (Foucault 289). Interior structure embodied the unique essence of an organism. In linguistics, this approach to wholes and parts gave rise to in-depth studies of syntax and inflection. Friedrich Schlegel, the source of Coleridge’s meditations on organic form, presented a theory of language in which, “for the word to be able to say what it is, it must belong to a grammatical totality” (Foucault 306). Organicist thought emphasized that a single entity, with all of its constituent parts, developed across time, leading a generation of economic thinkers such as David Ricardo to examine how wealth grew in successive cycles (Foucault 278). In multiple discourses, this new way of understanding part-whole relations privileged networks and webs as objects of study.

The persistence of the organic metaphor in the Victorian period continued in spite of biological developments that questioned the life force Coleridge had emphasized. The 1830s were marked by paradigm shifts in biological science. As Denise Gigante notes, theories of life in the Romantic period had largely subscribed to epigenesis, which, hypothesizing that embryonic development begins with an undifferentiated structure, placed an imagined vital power at the core of organic life.⁴ But the trend did not last. “The cell theory articulated in the late 1830s by Theodor Schwann and Matthias Schleiden reduced living form from an organic flow of power to a structural assemblage, analyzable in its living parts” (Gigante 36). After Schwann and Schleiden, the emphasis was no longer

⁴“During the first half of the eighteenth century there were two fundamental theories about the origin and development of life: *preformation* and *epigenesis*. According to preformation, organisms are already preformed in the embryo, and their development involves little more than an increase in size. According to epigenesis, however, organisms originally exist only as inchoate ‘germs’ or ‘seeds,’ and their development consists in the actual generation of an organism’s characteristic structure and organization” (Beiser 164).

“force,” but rather “structure” in biology (ibid. 266). However outdated the principles of unity in multiplicity or a vital power pervading the whole may have appeared in light of new cell theory, they continued to hold sway, as metaphor, in meditations on literary form.

The Victorians were attuned to Coleridge's organicist aesthetics. Even as Dickens completed *Our Mutual Friend*, articles in prominent periodicals addressed Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare. In December 1865 — one month after the publication of the novel's last installment — a *North British Review* article elucidated the key points of Coleridge's treatment of form. Organic form, emphasized the author, could not be reduced to mere unity:

[Coleridge] showed how the form of Shakespeare's dramas was suited to the substance. . . . He pointed out the contrast between mechanic form superinduced from without, and organic form growing from within; that is if Shakespeare or any modern were to hold by the Greek dramatic unities, he would be imposing on his creations a dead form from without, instead of letting them shape themselves from within, and clothe themselves with a natural and living form. (Shairp 292)

Mechanical form fails to fit the spirit of the times and constitutes an aesthetic flaw. Conceiving of historical transformation by reference to life processes, the article showcases what Foucault observes in *The Order of Things*: historical consciousness emerged in part through the arche of the organic. Only one month after the publication of this article, another one discussing Coleridge's aesthetic theory appeared in *The Westminster Review*, whose anonymous author was none other than the young Walter Pater. In addition to covering the key principles of organic form (“Neither matter not form can be perceived asunder”; “form [is] suggested from within” [120]), Pater revealed that multiplicity was key to Coleridge's theory. In Shakespeare, wrote Pater, “there is the most constraining unity in the most abundant variety” (121). He based his praise of Coleridge on quotes highlighting the interplay of the one and the many: “‘What is beauty?’ [Coleridge] asks. ‘It is the unity of the manifold, the coalescence of the diverse’” (123). Occasionally, Coleridge's writings lead to the articulation of ideas that will characterize Pater's mature work. As Pater sees it, while form comes from within, matter gestures outward, entailing the perception of color and tone, placing emphasis on the senses. If matter opens the way for playfulness and excess, so can form. “Capricious detail” in Shakespeare's plays, and the “waywardness” of the parts coexist with the “unity of effect” (120, 121).

In the Victorian period powerful theories of organic form were offered by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning suggests that poetic form should grow from within. Addressing the question “What form is best for poems?” Aurora, the poet-protagonist, subscribes to the organic ideal: “trust the spirit / As sovran nature does, to make the form / For otherwise we only imprison spirit” (5.223–25). Organic form suits Aurora’s search for independence, as it opens the way for literary invention. If spirit creates a new form for every work, then the possibilities are endless: “Five acts to make a play. / And why not fifteen? Why not ten? or seven?” (5.229–30). Insofar as form results from a spirit that infuses the whole, it resembles life, which also “develops within” (2.284).

If in *Aurora Leigh* organic form promises authenticity in art, in George Eliot’s “Notes on Form in Art,” it entails multiplicity. Eliot reiterates some of the central tenets of Coleridge’s theory. The “highest example of Form” consists of “the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole, which is itself in the most varied and therefore the fullest relation to other wholes” (232). To gloss this equation of proper form with the proliferation of diversity, she offers an organic analogy (“the human organism comprises things as diverse as the finger-nails and tooth-ache” [232]) and praises organic form for balancing unity with multiplicity: “the highest Form, then, is the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness” (232). Eliot’s criteria for evaluating form in art thus derive from the evolution of life forms.

Organic form as an aesthetic ideal offered some principles by which the contemporary reviewers of *Our Mutual Friend* could judge the novel. *The Athenaeum* praised it because in it “the fountain of variety show[ed] [no] signs of exhaustion” (1865a: 569); *The Examiner* remarked that it featured “a well-harmonized relation of all parts to one central thought” (1865b: 681).⁵ The reviewers were impressed with the variety of character and scene, which they recognized as properly Dickensian. Dickens himself, it seems, was more attuned to the single-handedness of design that countered the symphonic qualities of the novel. In a metafictional

⁵The “Postscript,” where Dickens writes about the “finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom,” foregrounds deliberateness of the design, but does not refer to the central principle of organic form — that each part should reflect the spirit of the whole (798).

moment, Mortimer tells a passionately obsessed Eugene, "Everything . . . seems, by fatality, to bring us around to Lizzie" (526). Tired of Eugene's preoccupation with Lizzie, he is mocking his friend for being unable to stop thinking of her, but in doing so he also captures the novel's tendency to retrace its own steps.

Unlike Barrett Browning and Eliot, Dickens does not abide by the organic ideal. In a well-known appraisal of the novelist, George Henry Lewes treats this as a failure. In his account, characterization is the site where organic form is conspicuously absent. Like other "type[s]" in Dickens's fiction, *David Copperfield's* Mr. Micawber and his wife "mov[e] like pieces of simple mechanism always in one way, . . . instead of moving with the infinite fluctuations of organisms":

When one thinks of Micawber always presenting himself in the same situation, moved with the same springs, and uttering the same sounds, always confident on something turning up, always crushed and rebounding, always making punch — and his wife always declaring she will never part from him, always referring to his talents and her family — when one thinks of the "catchwords" personified as characters, one is reminded of the frogs whose brains have been taken out for physiological purposes, and whose actions henceforth want the distinctive peculiarity of organic action. (148)

Associated with automation and mechanization, repetition impedes organicism. Through recurrent utterances and gestures, Dickens's novels draw attention to what others may seek to hide — that characters consist only of words. Like Lewes, Walter Bagehot treats Dickens's inorganic aesthetic as a failure, though his target is fragmentation rather than repetition. For him, Dickens's novels formally resemble the city they depict so well. Bagehot writes, "[e]verything is there, and everything is disconnected. . . . [E]ach scene, to his mind is a separate scene, each street a separate street" (197). "He does not care to piece them together," notes Bagehot, criticizing what he perceived as the lack of harmonious totality (ibid.).

Whereas 19th century criticism disparaged fragmentation in this manner, its twentieth-century counterpart located productive ambiguities in it. In an influential reading of *Bleak House*, D. A. Miller highlights "the compositional principle . . . of discontinuity":

In Dickens, of course, the fissured and diffuse character of novel form is far more marked than in the work of any of his contemporaries, extending from the extraordinary multitude of memorably disjunct characters, each

psychologically sealed off from understanding another, to the series of equally disparate isolated spaces across which they collide. (76)

Highlighting such disorder, the novel continually undercuts the seeming orderliness of the domestic sphere to which the reader must resort for the purpose of reading. For Miller, discontinuities in the Dickensian text parallel and capture the dynamics of an “all-encompassing” system (the Chancery), which remains “not totalizable” (61). It is not possible to delineate what lies within and outside that court’s diffuse power. I also re-evaluate Dickens’s inorganic aesthetic, but rather than focusing on fragmentation, I turn to repetition, which, I believe, allows *Our Mutual Friend* to divorce form from content.

If, as Miller suggests, Dickens resists harmonious unity in ways “far more marked than in the works of any of his contemporaries,” which historical circumstances account for that singularity? Bagehot’s criticism provides a lead: the novelist’s preoccupation with urban life in general, and with London in particular, may have elicited an inorganic aesthetic. Depictions of the city in Dickens’s fiction at times conjure up a cacophony; disorder reigns supreme. The city seems to lack organic form even though it teems with life. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, “at the very core of London” the narrator locates “a whirl of noise and motion” (46). In *Bleak House*, Krook’s shop, with all its chaos, metonymically stands for the city, whose parts have become undistinguishable under the heavy fog. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the ubiquity of waste material in the city signals a structure at odds with the organic:

That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows, gyrated here and there and everywhere. Whence can it come, whither can it go? It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by the electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails. (147)

Decay abounds in the city, whose fragments have fallen prey to dust and airborne paper. Rather than the harmonious interdependence of complementary parts, we find the seemingly endless reproduction of waste matter in the urban environment.

Urban disorder is not the only Victorian material context in which Dickens encountered an alternative to organic form. His fascination with machines provides another lead in historically situating the inorganic aesthetic that finds its most mature form in his last complete novel. This suggestion may come as a surprise, given his association of mechanical,

reiterated motion with the detrimental effects of industrial capitalism. In *Hard Times*, the mechanistic nature of factory life amounts to monotony: the steam engines “abate . . . nothing of their set routine, whatever happened. Day and night again, day and night again. The monotony was unbroken” (340). Yet there is much more to Dickens’s treatment of machines than this superficial linkage of engines with monotony would suggest. As Tamara Ketabgian shows, machines in and beyond *Hard Times* also “create the impression of a vast and unknowable depth.” Ketabgian explains that “[w]ith fires concealed deep in its boilers, the Victorian machine was synonymous with great intensities of pressure and power” (64). In *Hard Times*, Louisa Gradgrind reveals the irrepressible power embedded in mechanical energy when she exclaims, looking at the Coketown mills, “There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!” (132). The fire coming out of the machines becomes a measure of the depth and unpredictability of Louisa’s emotions, which cannot be contained by her father’s restrictive education.

As Ketabgian notes, Dickens’s fascination with the uncontainable energy embedded in machines also surfaces in “The Chatham Dockyard,” where the account of steam-powered work in the dockyard first captures the repetitious nature of the endeavor: “Ding, Clash, Dong, BANG, Boom, Rattle, Clash, BANG, Clink, BANG, Dong, BANG” (368). In the machine world, repetition gives rise to an irregular rhythm. The machines speak an alien language that remains unintelligible. The “machines of tremendous force” that Dickens sees on the dockyard are indispensable:

Yet what would even these things be, without the tributary workshops and the mechanical powers for piercing the iron plates — four inches and a half thick — for rivets, shaping them under hydraulic pressure to the finest tapering turns of the ship’s lines, and paring them away, with knives shaped like the beaks of strong and cruel birds, to the nicest requirements of the design! (370)

The simile ascribes to the machine the energy and drive associated with life forms. Inorganic form has become as exquisite as its organic counterpart. The machine’s highly specialized design neatly shapes the intricate structure of a formidable ship. A world onto itself, machinery harbors an awe-inspiring power, its energy almost sublime. Perhaps, like the sublime itself, it dwarfs the human subject, calling into question the individual’s presumed self-sufficiency. Indeed, rejecting, as it were, organicism’s emphasis on essence, the inorganic aesthetic challenges individuality in *Our*

Mutual Friend: what with character doubling and instances of mistaken identity, among other features, the structure of the novel counters organicism's characteristic insistence on individuation.

Organic Form as Individuation

Positing the affinity of the organic with individuation is not a matter of consensus. For Terry Eagleton, organic form in the 19th century harked back to the community ideal forged by feudal power. He asserts that, among the Victorian novelists, Dickens is the least "contaminated with organicist ideologies" (154). Many other bourgeois intellectuals in the Victorian period readily adopted the values of the landowning class, including organicism. As Eagleton maintains, Dickens challenged that norm, supplanting organic communities with synthetic entities such as finance capitalism, state bureaucracy, and ideological apparatuses: "the aesthetic unity of his mature work is founded, not on a mythology of 'organic community,' but on exactly the opposite" (156). While I agree with Eagleton that Dickens challenged organicism, I maintain, following Foucault's lead, that the organic in 19th century discourse could represent and support modern tendencies (such as liberal individualism) rather than being a throwback to feudal forms of collectivity.

Organic form's affinity with individuation is rooted in the work of Coleridge. In "Theory of Life," Coleridge explicitly asserts that life is defined by "the principle of individuation"; in "Life" he states that "[l]ife is a tendency to individualise" (512; 1029). For him, individuality is the rule of organic form: "individuality is the most intense where the greatest dependence of the parts on the whole is combined with the greatest dependence of the whole on its parts" (512). Herbert Spencer popularized the principle to which Coleridge subscribed: "organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous" (3). Spencer explains that, in addition to the diversity of form within a single organism, diversity across species was deepening in time, culminating in the emergence of man, a species whose members were highly individuated. Spencer's racialist schema singles out the endpoint of organic progress as the "civilized individual" (27). Organicism even accounts for the construal of the human subject as profit-maximizing:

The enhanced demand for every commodity, intensifies the functional activity of each specialized person or class; and this renders the specialization more definite where it already exists, and establishes it where it is but

nascent. By increasing the pressure on the means of subsistence, a larger population again augments these results; seeing that each person is forced more and more to confine himself to that . . . by which he can gain most. (47)

Previously, Edmund Burke and Auguste Comte had held the opposite view in which organicism meant the subordination of individual will to social duty. Spencer, on the other hand, finds that organicism provides an apt metaphor for the capitalist order. Based in part on Spencer's position, Sally Shuttleworth has pointed out that organic metaphors could assign power to the individual (9–10).⁶ The logic implicit in *Our Mutual Friend* responds to the pattern that Shuttleworth has observed. For Dickens, the inorganic resists the individuation that organicism entails.

As the idea of the organic form is withdrawn, objects begin to lose their distinctness in Dickens's novel: in Mr. Venus's "shop-window," there is "a muddle of objects vaguely resembling pieces of leather and dry stick, but among which nothing is resolvable into anything distinct" (83). Precisely because the objects in the shop window are virtually the same — all leathery and dry — they have lost their identity. Only the "tallow candle" standing in the midst of these objects, and apart from them, actually has identity — it is named. Undermining differentiation, sameness produces a crisis of identity. A similar dynamic is present in the novel as a whole. Doubling and reoccurrence undercut differentiation, and disguises and mistaken identities abound. Just as Radfoot is mistaken for Harmon, Riderhood sees his own image when he looks at Bradley; Betty cannot tell Lizzie and Bella apart.

When Betty is ill and perceives Lizzie as just "a face bending down," she thinks she sees Bella. Puzzling her further, Lizzie asks, "[d]id you think that I was long gone?" The question furthers Betty's conviction that she is speaking to Bella because she has not seen that young woman in a long time (505). Betty's confusion is rooted in her illness, but it also points toward the doubling of Lizzie and Bella. Her words are not as delirious as they first seem — it is, indeed, "the earnest face of a woman who is young and handsome" that she sees, which could describe either Bella or Lizzie (*ibid.*). The doubling becomes uncanny when the two young women meet, and Lizzie tells Bella what she sees in the fire. Their emotional states are interchangeable:

⁶ A detailed summary of the conservative tendencies of the organic metaphor appears in McGeachie, whose overall argument is that Victorian organicism was "far more complex than the conservative ideology model" upheld by Eagleton (212).

“Shall I tell you, asked Lizzie, “what I see down there?”

“Limited little b?” suggested Bella with her eyebrows raised.

“A heart well worth winning, and well won. A heart that, once won, goes through fire and water for the winner, and never changes, and is never daunted.”

“Girl’s heart?” asked Bella, with accompanying eyebrows.

Lizzie nodded. “And the figure to which it belongs — ”

“Is yours,” suggested Bella.

“No. Most clearly and distinctly yours.” (520)

With modesty, both women deny that the heart Lizzie describes could be their own. Yet the reader knows that the description could apply to either one of them: they both remain deeply loyal to the men who have won their hearts. Even though we recognize Bella and Lizzie as independent subjects, their attributes mirror each other. Such doubling challenges the thrust for individuation implicit in organic form. The Dickensian world we inhabit is one of kaleidoscopic reflections rather than unique essences.

The relation between Riderhood and Bradley Headstone operates similarly in that it highlights the resemblance of characters who belong to different classes. When the latter is disguised as the former, his appearance is convincing:

Truly, Bradley Headstone had taken careful note of the honest man’s dress in the course of the night-walk they had had together. He must have committed it to memory, and slowly got it by heart. It was exactly reproduced in the dress he now wore. And whereas, in his schoolmaster clothes, he usually looked as if they were the clothes of some other man, he now looked, in the clothes of another man or men, as if they were his own. (619)

In his own clothes, Bradley Headstone looks out of place: the shell does not match the inside. When he is in disguise, the appearance is in accord with his character, but then the result is uncanny, as one man fully resembles another. If essences are not unique to individuals (Riderhood and Headstone appear to have the same core), this is in line with the novel’s overall orchestration of mirror effects and replication of tropes. In a humorous moment, one of the characters explicitly recognizes the other as his double: “‘Wish I may die,’ said Riderhood, smiting his right leg, and laughing, as he sat on the grass, ‘if you ain’t ha’ been a imitating me, T’otherest governor! Never thought myself so good-looking afore!’” (618). Narcissistic and boisterous, Riderhood is flattered by what unsettles common sense. He has become both the subject who is observing and the object being observed.

When differentiation begins to dissolve, conventional subject-object relations are upset. Jenny Wren, herself small in stature, dresses dolls. As John Harmon almost drowns, he has no sense of selfhood, but can relate to himself in the third person: "There was no such thing as I, within my knowledge. It was only after a downward slide through something like a tube, . . . that the consciousness came upon me, 'This is John Harmon drowning'" (363). The lack of differentiation introduces an endless possibility for replacement. Characters — and things — resemble and become substitutes for one another. Mrs. Boffin describes the faces in her dream: "For a moment it was the old man's, and then it got younger. For a moment it was both the children's, and then it got older. For a moment it was a strange face, and then it was all the faces" (191). The dream is an effort to connect John Harmon's present self to his former, but it harbors a meaning in excess of its direct intention: in the dream world "all the faces" come to resemble one another, and similitude knows no boundaries. As in the dust heaps, in this dream the collective is nothing but the individual part replicated over and over.

Pulling the reader outside the sphere of individuation, echoes and reflections in *Our Mutual Friend* defy the principles of liberal modernity. For Dickens, repetition gestures toward a metaphysical beyond that is irreconcilable with worldly pursuits. Consider, for example, the cyclical motion of the "dark and unknown sea" in *Dombey and Son*, whose ceaseless murmur whispers Paul's death: "the restless sea went rolling on all night, to the sounding of a melancholy strain — yet it was pleasant too — that rose and fell with the waves, and rocked him, as it were, to sleep" (10, 194). Just as the sea is both the medium in which Dombey's commercial enterprise thrives and the locus for transcending the mundane,⁷ dust in *Our Mutual Friend* both signifies the corruptness of modern life and stands outside modernity as it resists its paradigmatic structure, organic form. The latter significance is reaffirmed by the religious connotations of dust.⁸ It is no wonder that repetition as an aesthetic quality bypasses modern secular trends: up until the Renaissance, Western culture, fascinated by "how the world must fold upon itself, duplicate itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one another," took resemblance to bespeak God's will (Foucault 29). This is not to say, how-

⁷ For the double significance of the sea, see Stewart 2000.

⁸ The language of Adam's fall in Genesis ("for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" [*King James* 3:19]) and of the Anglican burial service (earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust) represents dust as both the essence and the end of life.

ever, that inorganic elements of form in *Our Mutual Friend* simply speak the language of pre-modern times. While they build upon that legacy, they nod toward the Victorian preoccupation with urban chaos and mechanical power and respond to the contemporary treatment of the human subject as irreducibly individual.

Yet the novel can suspend differentiation only for so long. Its closure neatly places individuals into slots to which they naturally seem to belong, restoring them to their social positions as in the case of John Harmon. Differentiation begins to reign supreme as the mistaken identity plots move toward resolution. A lengthy monologue by Mrs. Boffin reveals that she recognized John Harmon even as she pretended not to. Identity appears essentialized when we find out that Boffin never changed, always remaining modest even as he pretended to worship money. At the moment the individual's identity appears to become unique and stable ("John Harmon now for good, and John Rokesmith for nevermore" [757]), the dust heaps disappear: "Mr. and Mrs. John Harmon had so timed their taking possession of their rightful name and their London house, that the event befell on the very day when the last waggon-load of the last Mound was driven out at the gates of Boffin's Bower" (759). The domestic space, framed by economic status and private ownership, ultimately expunges the undifferentiated heaps. Whereas most characters settle into the set of roles that they are to play in society and family, Headstone and Riderhood die, their doubling perhaps too deeply ingrained to be replaced by individuation. If the self-echoing structure of *Our Mutual Friend* reveals the key role that repetition plays in challenging organicism, the novel's closure suggests the difficulty of sustaining that alternative aesthetic.

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